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ABSTRACT

Changes made to improve a program providing education students a chance to observe and participate in public school elementary classrooms were based on two assumptions. First, it was assumed that students would see a greater need and relevance for ideas and concepts presented in education courses if they spent more time in the schools. Second, it was assumed that education courses would be more meaningful if they were taken concurrently with the field experience. Based on these assumptions an expanded observation experience was provided that was coordinated with the theory of instructional methods classes. The modified program involved four courses taken concurrently with 200 hours of observation in the schools. It was anticipated that extensive early field experience would provide the same benefits, though considerably more, that senior student teaching is assumed to provide. It was also expected that the students would develop the need to learn and apply new instructional skills. Students, however, were so overwhelmed with the day-to-day tasks involved in the elementary classroom that they could not focus adequately on new ideas. The classroom became a stifling experience rather than an experience facilitating student growth. Therefore, it is recommended that methods courses be taught after students have had classroom observation and participation experiences. (Author/RH)

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# EARLY ELEMENTARY FIELD-BASED EXPERIENCE: A UNIVERSITY AND PUBLIC SCHOOL APPROACH

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Senior student teaching generally enjoys a very good reputation. Teacher educators frequently hear students and teachers comment that their student teaching experience was the most valuable part of their program. In an attempt to provide students with a similiar experience, though earlier, North Texas State University has traditionally required students to spend time in the schools during their second semester of professional education. This requirement entails a minimum of sixty hours of observation in the public schools. In some instances the students teach small groups of students, however teaching is not a requirement for the experience. While this observation experience does not enjoy the same status as student teaching, it is a very valued part of the program. It provides the students with an opportunity to observe first-hand the things which go on in the elementary school. This provides a valuable background experience as the students take other education courses. The project described here was an attempt to improve this early field experience.

The changes in the program revolved around two basic assumptions. First was the assumption that by spending more

time in the schools the students would see a greater need and relevance for ideas and concepts presented in education courses. The second assumption was that education courses taken concurrently with the field experience would be more meaningful. The students would see the need for the ideas presented in the classes and have an opportunity to try some of them in an actual school setting. It was felt that these assumptions allowed the blending of "so-called" theory of methods classes with the practice and reality of the elementary classroom.

The program involved four courses taken concurrently with two hundred (200) hours of observation in the schools. The four courses included: (1) Elementary Curriculum, (2) Elementary Science Methods, (3) Developmental Reading, and (4) Lab Experience in the Elementary School. All course work was scheduled for Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Tuesdays and Thursdays were reserved exclusively for observations in the school.

The school used for the student observations was a suburban elementary school. The school had self-contained classes at the primary level and open-area classes at the intermediate level. The principal and teachers agreed to have the preservice teachers in their school. They also agreed to let the students try different approaches to instruction. This allowed the students to "field test" some of the ideas presented in their methods classes. The teachers also

agreed to allow the university professors to use their classrooms to demonstrate different methods of instruction. There was a close working relationship between the schools and the university personnel.

It was anticipated that extensive early field experience would provide the same benefits, though considerably more, that senior student teaching assumedly provides. Each student was placed in two classroom settings. They changed grade levels midway through the program. The program provided students an opportunity to view the world of teaching from the classroom teacher's perspective and also the opportunity to work with elementary school children. Particularly important was the belief that by students being placed in an elementary classroom on a continuing basis while at the same time taking their methods courses, a unique situation would be created. We expected the elementary classrooms to create a need for the concepts and skills taught in the methods courses and at the same time to provide real, rather than simulated settings in which to practice and refine instructional skills. If the students developed problems in implementing the instructional strategies, we would be nearby to provide assistance.

We anticipated that the program would create a need on the students' part, and indeed it did; however, the need it created was different from the one we anticipated. We expected the students to develop the need to learn and apply new

instructional skills; however, the need the students developed was the need to survive. They were so overwhelmed with the day-to-day task involved in the elementary classroom that they could not focus adequately on new ideas.

We had expected to develop needs for new and different approaches; however, the students focused more on what the teachers were doing and how they were dealing with the students in the classroom. They became less receptive to new or different methods and approaches and wanted to deal exclusively with the various situations they were encountering in the schools. They were not interested in developing an activity oriented science center because they had observed enough to be apprehensive about leaving "some students" to work on their own. They wanted to know how to deal with the classroom as it existed, not how to change it or even to question if it needed changing. They found it difficult to believe their methods instructor, who said fourth graders can successfully manipulate science equipment, when they were observing in a classroom where the teacher did not allow students to handle equipment. Even when the methods instructor demonstrated in the classroom they felt students were simply well behaved for him.

Rather than the classroom providing an opportunity for the students to develop alternative instructional strategies that would fit their particular personalities, the opposite

occurred. The classroom, in effect, became a stifling experience, rather than a growth producing one. When they were taught an instructional model in their methods course and they saw a different, and sometimes contradictory model being used in the classroom, they immulated the school model exclusively.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The early field experience as described in this program was not successful in accomplishing our original goals. It was simply too much to ask students to take twelve semester hours of coursework while at the same time spending two hundred hours in an elementary classroom. It was unrealistic to expect them to be able to synthesize the input from two quite different settings into a meaningful and productive experience, at least under the conditions we established. If earlier and more field experiences are to be valuable in the preparation of teachers, then we believe a much different format will have to be used. We recommend that methods courses not be taught in conjunction with the early field experiences, but rather after the experiences. Seemingly, it is unrealistic to expect undergraduates to simultaneously observe elementary classroom practices, consider their merits, weigh them against sometimes contradictory practices taught by their methods instructors, and then successfully implement alternative practices into their host classrooms.

We are aware this recommendation stands in striking contrast to the common belief in teacher education that requires students to take all of their methods courses first, assuming that what is learned will be used at some later date, either in senior student teaching or on the job. Nevertheless, we believe our proposal makes sense. One need only compare the receptiveness and enthusiasm present in graduate methods courses where the students have had some experience, with the naive and sometimes befuddled attitude evidenced by undergraduates who have yet to perceive a need for what they are being taught.

We feel the short-coming was not the early field experience, but rather the courses taken concurrently with the experience. We believe that if students have the field experience early and relatively independent from courses they will indeed develop a need for what is to come later in methods courses.